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AUTHOR Eason, Douglas O.
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ABSTRACT

Although enrollment in interdisciplinary studies is increasing in the two-year college, much remains to be done in defining and planning interdisciplinary programs. A valuable distinction can be made between interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies. The first refers to exploring significant relationships between or among unrelated disciplines while the latter illuminates one particular discipline by the infusion of information from closely-related disciplines. The cost and coordination demands of intradisciplinary studies are usually minimal; the major problems for most faculty are time and inspiration. Interdisciplinary studies, however, require the importation of the humanities into a curriculum which would otherwise willingly ignore them. Successful examples of interdisciplinary humanities programs are the American civilization course offered at the University of Michigan at Dearborn and the Humanities Perspectives on the Professions program at the University of Florida. These programs seek to enrich the study of science, technology, or the professions by including humanities subject matter. Both interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies have inevitable drawbacks, but also have obvious benefits, including providing relational learning for general education and career students, providing new challenges for faculty, and helping students see that knowledge is organic and interdependent. (Author/KL)

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CHARTING THE TERRITORY: INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Douglas O. Eason
Columbia State Community College
Columbia, Tennessee

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Southeastern Conference on English in the
Two-Year College (Biloxi, MI, February 20, 1981)

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COLUMBIA STATE COMMUNITY COLLEGE
P. O. BOX 1315
COLUMBIA, TENNESSEE 38401
(615) 388-0120

ABSTRACT

Charting the Territory: Interdisciplinary Studies

by Douglas O. Eason, Assistant Dean of Arts and Sciences

There are some helpful distinctions to be made in the delineation of what we commonly call interdisciplinary studies. While most faculty accept the need for relational knowledge--of understanding the relationship of one idea, concept, or fact to another--as a primary goal of education, there is a less well developed sense of the natural, territorial boundaries of programs which attempt to foster such knowledge. For organizational purposes it is helpful to divide such studies into two disciplinary regions: interdisciplinary studies and intradisciplinary studies. The first refers, in my taxonomy, to exploring significant relationships between or among unrelated disciplines while the latter illuminates one particular discipline by the infusion of information from closely related disciplines. Faculty planning new programs need to define their territorial objectives for new related studies courses. Deciding whether they wish to develop interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary studies programs has important implications for their students, their faculties, and their institutions.

Charting the Territory: Interdisciplinary Studies

Anyone who has successfully taught English or any other humanities course knows something about interdisciplinary studies, about getting the nine daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne to dance together at least in pairs and, if possible, to the same tune. Our concern for getting the Muses to relate their arts within the humanities curriculum stems from our desire to help students see the shape and pattern of an idea as well as its cultural context. Indeed, some of us have found that an interdisciplinary approach is the only practical way of introducing difficult subjects to our reluctant, career-oriented students.

When I was teaching sophomore literature, for example, most of my colleagues refused to teach Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard," even though it occupied a prominent place in our anthology, because they considered it next to impossible to teach such a complex and difficult play to unsophisticated, open-admissions students for whom the need of drama was adequately satisfied by watching weekly episodes of "Dallas." I revere Chekhov and felt the play was too important to neglect despite warnings that our students could never make sense of those Chekhovian silences, those blank and seemingly pointless conversations, and--of course--those unpronounceable Russian names. I was undaunted and pressed ahead with my plan even though all the warnings and my own secret fears were soon realized. In desperation I began to look for ways to make this magnificent play meaningful for people living in a rural section of southern middle Tennessee.

The first breakthrough came when I asked my students about the different classes of people in the play and they quickly focused on the servants as people they could understand and relate to. They wanted to know what a serf was and how serfdom compared to slavery. I pointed out that Chekhov himself was the son of an ex-serf. And I explained to them that Madame Ranevsky's cherry orchard had failed largely because of the loss of cheap labor which came with the Czar's Emancipation of the Serfs on March 3, 1861. Moreover, I hastened to point out that this was almost two years before President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation for American Negroes on January 1, 1863. Suddenly all this discussion of Russian and American history seemed to "open up" the play for the class and ultimately led several students to say that "The Cherry Orchard" was the most interesting play we read during the quarter.

I think most teachers have had similar experiences when they turned to a related field out of desperation, when they fell into interdisciplinary studies, as it were, rather than charted a well-planned course. Consequently, it is my goal to chart the territory where interdisciplinary studies may most effectively occur in order that we may plan our attempts at related studies rather than merely happen upon them by accident.

Despite a good bit of talk about interdisciplinary studies, I think that on the whole it is a rather unexplored territory. Most of our journeys into the realm have been timid, short trips into the forest for refreshing picnics without any concern for consulting a

map or planning a sustained journey or possible sojourn But I should point out that in recent years more people have apparently been willing to join such a caravan. According to a recent ERIC Clearinghouse report, The Humanities and Sciences in Two-Year Colleges, interdisciplinary humanities courses were one of only three humanities disciplines to show any increase in enrollment figures since 1975, the other two being political science and foreign languages. Indeed, the report reveals that literature was down by 13%, cultural anthropology by 10%, music appreciation by 9%, history and philosophy by 8%[1]. Moreover, the recently published Rockefeller Commission Report, The Humanities in American Life, recommends that "courses integrating themes and subjects from the humanistic disciplines with each other and with other fields of study" should be vigorously developed. In fact, the report points out that "integrated approaches to the humanities may be particularly appropriate in two-year colleges, which now enroll more than half of all freshmen in the country."[2]

While I do not want to be accused of begging the question, I feel that we have failed on occasion to recognize important

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[1]Mariam M. Beckwith, "How Faculty View the Humanities," in F.B. Brawer, ed., The Humanities and Sciences in Two-Year Colleges (Los Angeles: Center for the Study of Community Colleges and ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, 1980), p. 1.

[2]Richard W. Lyman, et alii, Report of the Commission on the Humanities, The Humanities in American Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 73.

and complex differences within the humanities as we consider related studies programs. There is, I believe, a valuable distinction to be made between interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies. The first refers, in my taxonomy, to exploring significant relationships between or among unrelated disciplines while the latter illuminates one particular discipline by the infusion of information from closely related disciplines. Faculty planning new programs need to define their territorial objectives for new related studies courses. Indeed, deciding whether they wish to develop interdisciplinary or intradisciplinary studies programs has important implications for their institutions, their faculties, and their students.

I have already given an example of intradisciplinary studies, of a course which stayed within the walls of traditional humanities disciplines, by recounting my experience with a sophomore literature class where I used signal historical events to draw the students into one of Chekhov's great plays. Literature and history, as we all know, are closely related disciplines, and one can well serve to illuminate the other. By the same token, I know of composition teachers who use art works such as Charles Demuth's painting "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold" as the source for observation and writing exercises, of art teachers who have their students read Wordsworth's "Lines Written in Early Spring" as they study the paintings of J.M.W. Turner, of history teachers who play folk music and songs of the Civil War Period to enliven their class present-

ations. The list is endless, and each new example reveals the lively mind of a dedicated instructor searching for ways to reach and move his or her students. The cost and coordination of such intradisciplinary studies are usually minimal. Suitable materials are often found in the local library or learning resource center; the real problem for most faculty is time and inspiration. The benefits, on the other hand, seem to be considerable. Teachers who look for intradisciplinary approaches seem to be highly motivated, relatively happy, and deeply committed to student learning and--not surprisingly--generally well liked by their students and colleagues.

Interdisciplinary studies, on the other hand, present quite another set of problems. When one attempts to explore significant relationships between or among essentially unrelated disciplines--to go outside the traditional walls of the humanities--the path can get very rocky indeed, and if we do find a place to have our picnic, we are almost immediately assaulted by ants, bees, and bears. The National Endowment for the Humanities has made significant contributions to higher education in that agency's attempt to foster the exploration of significant relationships between or among unrelated disciplines--especially when the attempt involves the importation of the humanities into a curriculum which would otherwise willingly ignore art, music, literature, philosophy, and the humane social sciences.

There are numerous courses which pursue the objective of developing such multi-disciplinary studies. One exciting model of cooperation was developed at the University of Michigan at Dearborn, an institution which heavily emphasizes the technologies. In an undergraduate course on American civilization which spans the period between 1865 and 1914, students examine the humanities against the background of technological and material culture. University faculty in literature, art history, and the history of music join with curators from the neighboring Henry Ford and Greenfield Village museums, combining lectures with tours of the museums and study of artifacts. In an even more expansive vein, the University of Florida has a program entitled "Humanities Perspectives on the Professions" which attempts to incorporate the method and substance of the humanities into the educational and preprofessional programs of students in four key areas of national concern: Health-care, Law, Engineering, and Business Administration.

In each of these cases the concern has been to bring the humanities to bear upon important questions, to enrich the study of the sciences, the professions, the technologies with the insights of humanistic learning. Alfred North Whitehead has wisely observed that "The antithesis between a technical and liberal education is fallacious. There can be no adequate technical education which is not liberal, and no liberal education which is not technical: that is, no education which does not impart both technique and

intellectual vision."[3]

Irrespective of my attempts at creating a new taxonomy, we can all agree that the term interdisciplinary is used to cover such a wide variety of course titles, subject matters, and instructional approaches that it is important for us to work toward more precise definitions, toward charting territorial boundaries. Whatever our goals, there is an inevitable credit and debit sheet that must be reckoned with. The debits are obvious. When faculty attempt to work closely together, to share their time, their talents, their disciplines--and yes, their classrooms and their supplies--there will be frictions. Administrators, unfortunately, will not always understand why films cost so much or why faculty loads are to be figured a new way. And students will not necessarily understand why they should take a field trip or read a Greek tragedy when all they want to do is "become a nurse."

While the benefits may seem obvious--especially to those of us who champion interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies--let me enumerate but three:

(1) The community college, more than any other type of institution, must come to terms with relational learning in its

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[3]The Aims of Education and Other Essays (London: Williams and Northgate Limited, 1929), p. 74.

two-year, undergraduate curriculum. For our transfer or university parallel programs, we must provide the bulk of the students' general education in the short two years we have them in our classrooms. For the career or vocational student, we have the obligation of providing them with the only general or liberal education they will ever be exposed to. Both interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies provide avenues for meeting a primary obligation of two-year colleges.

(2) Instructors who plan interdisciplinary syllabi and programs and teach in innovative programs can find new excitement in their sometimes stale teaching careers. Breaking away from business as usual can be extremely important to faculty members who see a sharp decline in the chances for job mobility and career advancement. New avenues of faculty development and new areas of disciplinary interest often emerge in working with other faculty and with other disciplines.

(3) Well-designed interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary courses should help students see that knowledge is organic and interdependent, that learning a new fact is not a static event but the lifeblood of a dynamic process. A student has begun to appreciate the processes of the mind when he or she can perceive an invisible intellectual chain between what is learned in the classroom and what is observed in life, when he or she realizes that neither facts nor opinions exist in isolation.

I think the 1980's will be the decade of interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary studies. The growing perception by the general public of the need for a viable general education curriculum for all students will force us to examine our options. According to a report by the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, over 80% of all instructors responding to a questionnaire felt that "faculty should be involved in more interdisciplinary courses"; moreover, such courses "ranked as the second most effective means of bolstering the humanities" in general.[4] While much has been said in the '70's about how college students must develop a respectable command of the basic communication skills--and to be sure much more will and should be said on that subject--the humanities and learning in general should lead beyond "functional" literacy to an understanding of ideas and events and ultimately to the capacity to make informed critical judgements.

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[4] Beckwith, p. 4.

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